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White House Cuts Flow of Information

News Media Treated As an Alien Force

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Almost five years ago, Robert M. Entman of Duke University wrote a guidebook on how President Reagan, then newly elected, could "tame" what he called "The Imperial Media."

Entman suggested, among other devices, keeping most government information officers "in the dark," discouraging them from mingling socially with journalists and using discipline to keep free-lance leakers from getting to the news media.

The Entman formula reads like "a blueprint for the Teflon presidency," in the words of A. Lawrence Chickering, executive editor of the Institute for Contemporary Studies, which sponsored the Entman study.

And although some of Entman's advice was off the mark (he suggested, for example, that a president "not make a fetish of getting on television"), his system also included the important suggestion that a new president could "tame White House beat reporting by decreasing reporters' expectations of full access." A new or popular president could "take advantage of the

country's growing preference for strong leadership to legitimize the approach," he wrote.

Only a few White House officials acknowledge knowing about the Entman formula, but Edwin Meese III, who ran the Reagan transition in 1980 and is now attorney general, was said to have used the advice as an early Bible, and former White House communications director David R. Gergen has said he openly opposed it.

Now, however, some reporters covering the Reagan administration say Entman appears to have written some of the golden rules for dealing with the news media.

Mainly, the Reagan team is less afraid to say "no" to reporters. Often politely, but sometimes defiantly, aides refuse to give information that journalists demand, even when they invoke the public's right to know or the clout of the nation's most powerful journalistic institutions.

Riding a wave of public antipathy for the media—and in some cases encouraging it—the Reagan administration appears to have succeeded to an unusual degree in selecting the information that goes to the media instead of reacting to reporters' queries.

"Every administration I have been associated with has tried to focus public attention on a given subject, to expose the president in the best light," White House spokesman Larry Speakes said last week. "Any corporation, including media corporations, do much the same thing, try to present their corporations in the best light."

"I would say this administration has been the most accessible as any so far as far as senior policy makers being willing to talk to the press on a regular basis and even a spot news basis," he said, citing the 30 minutes a day that White House chief of staff Donald T. Regan sets aside for reporters.

From the other side of the White House news room a different story comes.

"They pick the story every day. They pick the one that will almost invariably wind up on the nightly news, and that's the one they answer questions on or give access to information about," said Helen Thomas of United Press International, dean of the White House press corps.

"A lot of events, we're absolutely blacked out, and if you don't like it, too bad," she added. "The whole attitude is, 'We will tell you what we think you should know.'"

Although some journalists strongly disagree with Thomas and see the Reagan administration as no different from its predecessors, many others feel as she does.

"There has been a consistent and organized effort on the part of this administration to reduce the flow of government information, beginning with what they consider secret but extended far beyond that," says Bill Kovach, Washington editor of The New York Times.

"There is no area of government where information is not harder to get for us here, harder to get now than it was when I was here in the Nixon and Ford years," Kovach added.

"Their whole attitude is that government information belongs to the government," he said.

Kovach, like others, acknowledged that such complaints might be viewed as the latest "whining" of the media.

And some reporters get around the tactics, and do report some of the crucial internal debates or embarrassments that officials would prefer to keep beneath the serene surface.

Moreover, the Reagan administration has had its share of leakers. In the president's first term, battling White House aides spilled many of their secret battles onto the front pages of newspapers. Big secrets like the clandestine operation to support Nicaraguan counterrevolutionaries also leaked. The Reagan administration cannot be described as totally closed off from public—or media—scrutiny.

Still, the attitude toward the media and the level of discipline of this administration to get out its story appear to be on a different scale from its predecessors.

In contrast to reporting during previous presidencies, journalists said they often have less access to that mid-level of the bureaucracy where specialists can explain or amplify decisions made at the top.

"The people hardest to get to now are the worker bees," said ABC correspondent John McWethy, who covered the Defense Department until moving to the State Depart-

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